

# WESTWAYS

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE

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# The Strange Legacy of SAN NICOLAS

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEW WALKER



• The island was once covered with giant trees, somewhat similar to our oaks and then the wind covered them with sand

JUST about everything which could happen to an island, except sinking from sight completely or being blown into nothing by a nuclear explosion, has happened to San Nicolas Island, of the Santa Barbara group off California.

During prehistoric days, San Nicolas received rainstorms daily and nightly, producing great trees and other luxuriant vegetation. This was most fortunate for

the dwarf elephants living there, and whose forebears, the imperial elephants of what is now California, had become stranded on the island after the ocean closed in—and through the centuries became dwarf elephants. Foxes, lizards and snakes also were caught by the ocean trap when retreat was cut off from the mainland.

Then came climatic changes, and food

became scarce for the elephants. They fought a losing battle with slow starvation. The bones of these ancient elephants are being uncovered on this island by the winds as they move the sands around.

Somewhere along the line, too, prehistoric people moved out to this island where they no doubt had complete isolation from the warring tribes on the mainland. But the diet of these people was



almost exclusively abalones, and perhaps a few other assists from the sea. Then came another cycle of climatic changes, and once more the island was bombarded with rain.

Giant trees, somewhat similar to our oaks of today, came into being on the island because of these rains. The trees shaded the brush-covered mesas, and the island must have been beautiful in every aspect. Then came drought again; this time sudden and devastating.

Winds swirled over the bluffs heaping layer after layer of sand on the forests until the trees were completely hidden beneath tremendous dunes. Yet this calamity of the sand dunes is what now supplies the island with a readable calendar of the truly ancient people there. For, their campsites, marked with heaps of abalone shells, were also covered by the avalanche of sand, and thereby somewhat preserved.

But rains again hit the island, and bushes began growing over the dunes which, in turn, covered the ancient trees. Then came snails by the millions, and this plague of snails destroyed the bushes. So, in destroying the bushes, the snails destroyed themselves, inasmuch as they had nothing more to eat. Their shells remained, however, until a cycle of drizzles gradually disintegrated the shells, and the

lime of the shells was carried in solution to below the surface of the dunes.

The oak-like trees, still in an upright position beneath the dunes, absorbed this liquid lime as it trickled down through the sands, and the mineral content cemented the grains of sand together around the moulds of the former trees.

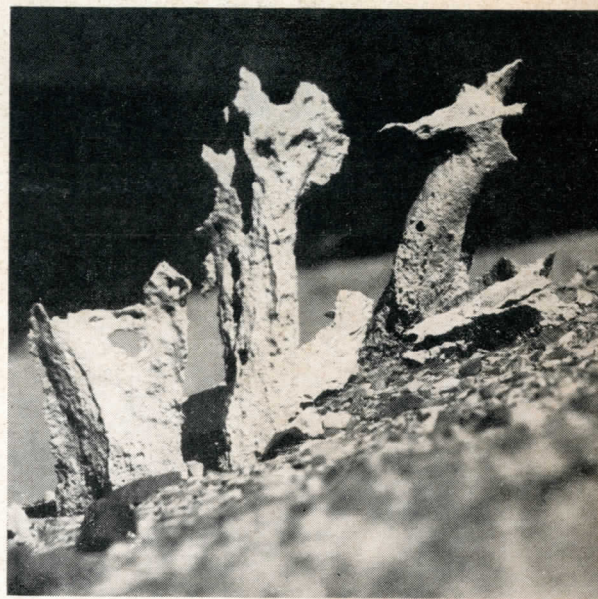
After an arid period, winds came again. Another tribe of Indians from the mainland was now living on the island, as the winds flattened the sand dunes, and dissipated much of the sand into the Pacific. In place of the hardwoods of long ago, there stood revealed on the island a peculiar forest of hollow tubes—the sandstone tree casts which are to be seen today on San Nicolas.

Along with all this, as with the turning of the pages of a history book, is the story of the first human inhabitants. For, even under the layer of sandstone tree casts, are man-made tools of the crudest design. It seems, too, that among the later generations of Indians to populate the island, the Indians thrived so well on abalones, along with other seafoods, and were so isolated from mainland tribal wars, that the population on the island increased to such great numbers that even seafood could not support the people there.

With the increase in population, and

with the depletion of the natural resources which the sea supplied, the people no longer had a balanced diet, and they would eat anything they could find, including the hard-to-handle sea urchins, which the people would have spurned in the days of plenty. Consequently, strange bone diseases, due to malnutrition, became prevalent as evidenced by the twisted human limbs found in burial pits of the period.

If only San Nicolas could be floated close to shore, it could be used as a display, we might say, for the weird past which even portions of the mainland has undergone. For, San Nicolas, once having been a chunk of all this, is still in the raw, and not covered over by pavements and buildings.



• Lime cemented the grains of sand together forming grotesque casts of the great trunks



• Hollow tubes remained when drought and wind swept off huge sand dunes of San Nicolas

• No trace remains of the hardwood forest of the island except these sandstone tree casts